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LATIN AMERICAN TRENDS

This publication is prepared for regional specialists in the Washington community by the Western Hemisphere Division, Office of Current Intelligence, with occasional contributions from other offices within the Directorate of Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles.

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Chile: The Church And Human Rights

There are growing indications that the Catholic church in Chile is taking a stronger stand on human rights issues. Recent statements by church leaders suggest that they are concerned over the military government's suspected complicity in the reported deaths and disappearances of Chilean extremists, accounts of which surfaced in the South American press in mid-July and subsequently received wide publicity.

The bishop of Santiago celebrated a mass last week for the families of 119 persons, mostly members of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), who allegedly were killed or wounded by government forces, or have been reported missing abroad under mysterious circumstances. The mass drew an overflow crowd and the bishop's sharp words about the need for Chileans to overcome "fear and insecurity" left no doubt among his listeners that he was rapping the junta's handling of the matter.

The Interdenominational Committee for Peace in Santiago believes that stories of leftist deaths in clashes in Argentina were circulated by security forces concerned with accounting for the disappearances, especially in view of a then impending visit of the UN Human Rights investigating mission, which has since been cancelled. The committee claims that the facts support its thesis that the 119 individuals had been detained by the military government and died in custody, and that the bodies were disposed of in Chile. Although the evidence is still circumstantial, accounts of the killings in Argentina could be a cover for secret executions by Chilean intelligence and security agents. Chile's controlled newspapers claimed that a number of Chilean extremists were killed in gun battles with Argentine police, and that others were

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killed in a purge by the MIR, but no proof has been offered by either country. Moreover, there is a strong possibility that right-wing Argentines under the control of former presidential adviser Lopez Rega collaborated with Chilean intelligence forces to plant false reports on the clashes.

When these reports first began gaining international attention, the peace committee filed a request with the Santiago appeals court to investigate the alleged disappearances, but the court refused and the Supreme Court upheld the decision. Foreign Ministry sources have since stated that an investigation is under way, but the lack of official information is encouraging a belief that the regime is engaged in a cover-up.

Meanwhile, in a meeting with Cardinal Raul Silva several weeks ago, President Pinochet pledged that the government would look into the case. Church sources, however, claim that the Cardinal's entreaty did not make much of an impact on Pinochet. Shortly after the meeting, Cardinal Silva gave the first hint that the church was losing patience with the government when he said he had "told the highest authorities of my country" that without unity Chile could not have prosperity, peace, or justice. He then appealed for a crusade for mutual respect and tolerance.

In a recent press statement, the Cardinal said he had no objection to publication of the peace committee's findings on the missing extremists, thereby implicitly encouraging its probe. The US Embassy assumes that Cardinal Silva also authorized or at least was aware of the mass offered last week for the families of the missing persons. The church's views were echoed by the Papal Nuncio, who expressed shock and the "disquiet of ambassadors accredited in Santiago" over the fate of the missing Chileans.

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While the church is not likely to engage in open polemics with the government, its spokesmen will unquestionably be more vocal in airing their misgivings about the government's conduct in dealing with human rights problems. Attention will probably be focused on two principal areas:

...The apparent failure of officials to explain satisfactorily the disappearance of persons presumably detained by security forces.

...Continued indications that the regime is not living up to promises that it would abide by new national security laws spelling out restrictions against illegal detention and torture.

Unless the Pinochet government takes some remedial action, the church will probably find itself on common ground with those in the opposition parties and labor who are becoming more critical of the regime.

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